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# The End Of Virginia's Eastern Shore Ferries

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALEXANDER C. BROWN

When, on April 15, the first private automobiles commence rolling across the fabulous, multi-million dollar, 17.6-mile bridge tunnel complex connecting the tip of Virginia's Eastern Shore with the mainland, an era of water transportation dating back to the early days of New World colonization will come to an end.

Many will regret its passing for, for some, the sail across lower Chesapeake Bay provided an unexpectedly pleasant diversion and not the annoying interruption it might have been for others in a greater hurry. Both sides have logic behind their feelings, although it would be the exceptional ship-lover who could enjoy watching a jam-packed 120-car ferryboat sail away leaving him on the dock to wait an hour or so for the next one because he was 121st in line.

However, the march of progress is inexorable and even with large, modern ferries running to capacity and still not being able to keep up with the traffic, the physical connection had to come, as now it has.

The very first connections by water between these widely separated parts of Virginia were tenuous indeed. First European visitor to the Eastern Shore apparently was redoubtable Capt. John Smith who, with a small band of hardy fellow explorers from Jamestown crossed the mouth of the Chesapeake from Cape Henry in an "open barge neare three tuns burthen." They landed on Smith Island off Cape Charles which the good, but hardly retiring captain was not averse to having bear his name. Crossing thence to the mainland of the Eastern Shore, the party was cordially received by an Indian potentate named Kiptopeke who conveyed them to his best, the big chief of Accomac.

"The King," subsequently wrote Captain John, "was the comliest, most proper civil salvage we incountered. His country is a pleasant fertile clay soyle, some small creeks, good harbours for small Barks. . . ."

This endorsement caused several colonists to move across to the Eastern Shore. One of the first permanent residences was established in 1634 and was known as "Dale's Gift" after Sir Thomas Dale who settled on what is now known as Old Plantation Creek. Dale's men set up "sundry salt works" on Smith Island.

THEREAFTER, MORE and more enterprising planters began to populate the Eastern Shore and in 1634, Accomac—which means "on no longer so elegant 2,242-ton Pocahontas which will be making the final run. Round trip for a Norfolk passenger on the first Pocahontas was the-other-side-of-the-water-place"—became one of Virginia's eight original shires. Eastern Shoremen were so far removed from the center of government at Jamestown, however, that the English sovereigns of the seventeenth century were wont to refer to their New World possessions here as "Ye Colony of Virginia and Ye Kingdome of Accawmacke."

Independence became of necessity a trait of the Eastern Shore colonials. They had to fend for themselves to a large degree and they were on their own in the matter of resisting the hit-and-run depredations of pirates and buccaneers who infested the outer banks islands in prey on shipping. For 200 years, then, small sailing craft transported those who had to travel. No one did it who did not have to, for the trip, even though covering a comparatively short distance, could be extremely uncomfortable and protracted with inclement weather and tide.

However, the connection between Accomac and Northampton counties with the Virginia Peninsula and the south side became less tenuous with the advent of the steamboat. First of her kind to appear in Hampton Roads was a little vessel named the Washington which put into Norfolk from New York in May 1815, before proceeding to the Potomac River on which she was intended to ply. Tidewater citizens were afforded the novelty of excursion trips around the harbor, however, and right away steamboat travel proved immensely popular.

Only two years later, a regular line of steam packets was instituted to run between Norfolk, Old Point Comfort and Baltimore. Sometimes these Baltimore boats would obligingly divert from their regular course to swing over to the Eastern Shore to land or pick up passengers.

Pleasure excursions from Norfolk also brought the steamers over to the Eastern Shore and finally, in June 1830, the Maryland and Virginia Steam Boat Company "having been applied to by several gentlemen" elected to run a boat each week from Norfolk to Cherrystone, an inlet about two miles north of the present city of Cape Charles.

Prophetically, it was the "new and elegant" 428-ton Pocahontas, "in all respects a boat of the first class," which was delegated for this pioneer duty. It will be the now-venerable and 52. Today's one-way steamer fare is 85 cents. Bridge passengers will pay the same.

THE LITTLE WOODEN hulled side-wheel steamers of the first half of the nineteenth century provided far more than mere transportation and apparently there was a carnival air to their movements which one can not detect on modern buses or aircraft. Advertisements generally announced that at such and such a time a "superior" packet would depart "on a party of pleasure." And it generally turned out that way, witness the description of a trip to the Eastern Shore appearing in the Norfolk and Portsmouth Herald of Sept. 7, 1836, in which an anonymous chronicler reported:

"At this season, when the faculties require frequent refreshing, we know of no sort of recreation that we would sooner recommend for the purpose, than that of an excursion . . . in the Old Dominion, in one of her weekly trips to the Eastern Shore. . . .

"We left Newton's Wharf (Norfolk) at a little before 9 o'clock in the morning, and after the boat had performed her daily errand to the Hampton and Old Point, dashed off into the wide waters of the Chesapeake, about 12. In a little time the motion of the boat told us that we were on the Horse Shoe (Shoal), and in half an hour more the 'land a-head' was descried; presently Cape Charles appeared to our right, and then the neat white house with the red roof, the residence of Pr. S. Bowdoin, King (the mark for which we steered) became visible. The delightful breeze over the salt water had by this time kindled up an appetite, which was soon pacified by a relish of anchovies, broiled ham, et cetera, and at 2 o'clock we were along side Mr. Bowdoin's wharf, at the mouth of King's Creek—a beautiful little sheet of water, separated from Cherrystone Creek by an isthmus terminated by the plantation of Mr. Bowdoin.

"We here had a view of the well-cultivated plantations of Governor Tazewell, with its ancient manor house; the handsome residence of Wm. Kennard, Esq, with its expansive fields of ripening corn, and the new and elegant mansion of Dr. Simkins at the head of the creek. . . .

"After a pleasant ramble along the shore, until 3 o'clock (the company) re-embarked. . . . The Old Dominion was again under way on her return—not, however, before Captain Selden had secured three fat and full-grown sheepsheds, just taken from the water. These delicious fish, with an abundance of other good things, were served up for dinner at 4 o'clock, and the company took their seats at the hospitable board and fared sumptuously. . . ."

DAILY STEAMBOAT service to the Eastern Shore had to wait another half century, however. In 1884, the Pennsylvania Railroad extended a branch line down to Cape Charles where extensive wharves and car-loading facilities were installed. Thereafter, daily sailings geared to the arrivals and departures of the NYP&N (New York, Philadelphia, and Norfolk, pronounced "Nippenend"), passenger trains were instituted. Initially the boats of the line carried only passengers and railway freight. However, during the first quarter of the present century an occasional automobile showed up to be transported across. This was permitted only if the owner would agree to have his gasoline tank completely drained. (If he was lucky, he got a gill of gas back when the trip was over!)

Gradually more and more automobiles and a few trucks and buses sought transportation and within a few years the, sharp-prowed existing steamers could not handle them. Meanwhile, in 1929, the Pennsylvania Railroad, which used also to tow carfloats across the bay (it still does) and up into Norfolk Harbor, a distance of 36 miles, moved their rail terminal to Little Creek, a newly dredged harbor in Princess Anne County. Steamboat wharves were also built at Little Creek and the Pennsylvania then diverted one of its steamers to this route, materially shortened to only 28 miles. The existing boats, the Maryland, Pennsylvania and Virginia Lee, were not suited to quick movement of automobiles, however, and in the early 1930's a vehicular ferry with bow and stern loading ramps was expressly built to handle automobile traffic exclusively between Cape Charles and Little Creek. This vessel, the 250-foot Del-Ma-Va, made her first trip on April 1, 1933, and like her followers, was equipped with a pair of enormous double doors at the bow which would be closed when under way. Her 13-foot clear headroom on the car deck made it possible to accommodate the then-largest trucks.

U.S. Route 13, advertised as the "Ocean Hiway—from Pines to Palms" was improved to handle a progressively mounting volume of traffic. In due course the Del-Ma-Va was joined by two additional running mates, the 1936-Princess Anne and the 1941-Pocahontas, all operated by the Virginia Ferry Corporation, a Pennsy subsidiary.

But post-war increases made even this fleet inadequate. To meet necessities the ferry company acquired its first of three World War II surplus LSTs—the 300-foot landing ships-tank—which had been the work horses of our invasion fleets. The tank deck of the first of these, the Northampton (ex-USS LST-61) was lowered to handle large trailer-trucks and, renamed and refurbished, the diesel-powered Northampton joined the fleet Nov. 2, 1948. An interesting addition to the ferry was a cycloidal propeller installed at the bow which permitted her to "turn on a dime" in congested Cape Charles harbor. This work was done by the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company and was judged highly satisfactory.

SUBSEQUENTLY A FORMER LSM—the smaller Landing Ship-Medium—was acquired and became the 198-foot tanker Kiptopeke servicing the ferry fleet.

Next improvement was to shorten the distance and running time by moving in 1950 the northern terminal from crowded Cape Charles to a newly-created harbor at Kiptopeke Beach, some seven and a half miles down the peninsula. An enormous and quite long ferry pier was built out from the beach with loading ramps for two ferries and was afforded sheltered water by two offshore breakwaters made by carefully sinking about a dozen old concrete-hulled freighters in a line.

In 1953, the Pennsylvania Railroad abandoned its through passenger train service to Cape Charles and on Feb. 28, the venerable steamboat Elisha Lee made her last trip from Cape Charles to Old Point and Norfolk. This only increased the load on the Little Creek boats which were acquired by the Commonwealth of Virginia in the name of the Chesapeake Bay Ferry Commission May 17, 1956.

Until 1958, then, the Lower Peninsula was without direct service to the Eastern Shore. But in February of that year the new commission provided another ex-World War II LST-converted boat. This was the 92-car ferry Old Point Comfort, also a Newport News Shipyard conversion, which briefly resumed service between Kiptopeke and a slip enlarged to handle her which had formerly been used by the Old Point-Willoughby ferries. During the five years there had been no Old Point service, however, traffic patterns had shifted with the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel funneling vehicles across to Willoughby Spit and the south shore and the Peninsula ferry did not pay.

Accordingly, the Old Point Comfort which, with a 14-foot overhead clearance could embark the largest of trucks, joined the Little Creek-Kiptopeke fleet, then including the three original steamers Del-Mar-Va, Princess Anne and Pocahontas, the two ex-navy LSTs Northampton and Ocean View, and the former Pennsylvania Railroad passenger steamer Virginia Lee, since converted to a diesel-powered vehicular craft named Accomac.

Further, to meet the needs of a mounting volume of traffic, all of the original steamers had been lengthened by the addition of new 'middlin sections. Both the Princess Anne in 1954 and the Del-Mar-Va in 1955 were "jumbo-sized" to add 90 feet; the Pocahontas, already the largest ship in the fleet, received 76 more feet in 1957.

THESE THREE VESSELS plus the diesel Ocean View will go to Delaware Bay after the bridge-tunnel here opens April 15. There, under new names, (Delaware, New Jersey, Cape Henlopen and Cape May), they will institute a new 16-mile ferry service from Lewes, Del., to Cape May, N.J., for the Delaware River and Bay Authority. In addition to the boats, many of whose 32-man crews will accompany them north, the Delaware Authority will acquire the services of Nolan Chandler who for many years served as general manager of the Chesapeake ferries.

Of the remaining vessels, both the Kiptopeke and the Accomac have already been sold and taken away. The fate of the other two hangs in abeyance though both are up for sale. All the boats are worn and weary, needing paint, particularly the Northampton. They may well end up as scrap iron.

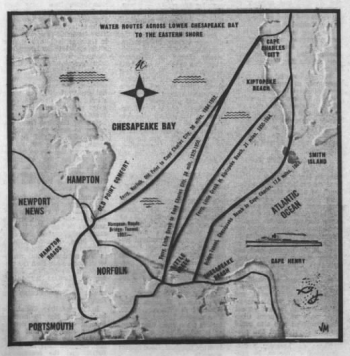
And so, before it was too late and the Chesapeake ferries had forever passed into antiquity, this correspondent, accompanied by some friends, his daughter and two of her sub-teenage contemporaries, elected one Sunday afternoon recently to embark on a "party of pleasure" from Little Creek to Kiptopeke Beach and return. Fate decreed that our conveyance should be the tired old Northampton, but this did not dim the spirits of the party. The day was superb, but chilly, and the crossing, taking about an hour and a half, though routine for the ferry's personnel, undoubtedly will be well remembered by some of the passengers who might recall Dr. Quincey's saying that man never does anything consciously for the last time without regret. Sea air, as usual, kindled the appetites of my young companions, which were by no means "pacified by a relish of anchovies" or any other such delectables as affected to the travelers on the steamboat Old Dominion in 1836, but rather by recurrent visits to the lunch counter for candy bars and colas.

Such diversions as examining through binoculars the works of the bridge-tunnel—its man-made islands, causeways, trestles and bridges, soon to put the boats out of business forever, innumerable trips around the decks—the car deck where temporarily-deserted autos huddled together patiently waiting in the semi-gloom below; the passenger deck with its dreary, overheated saloon peopled by equally patient passengers (many asleep); and the chilly, open promenade deck above—made the time fly. Our running mates on the line were duly noted in passing—the admittedly ugly LST conversions such as our own Northampton, the lumbering steamers, whose added midsections showed a different hue of rust.

THEY WERE CROWNED by silly-looking stove pipes stuck on top of their regular funnels. The reason for this was that, when lengthened, it became necessary to discharge the smoke at a greater elevation so that it would not swirl down on the after decks. And we watched with interest the involved docking procedure, the quick unloading of our cargo of automobiles, followed by equally expeditious reloading at Kiptopeke.

The sun sank in a blaze of glory, highlighting in golden strands the edges of low-lying clouds forming a backdrop to the Hampton Roads entrance as our ferryboat neared the end of her 21-mile trip back to Little Creek. I wondered, in the forthcoming years, how much my 16-year-old friends would remember of their voyage on that last Virginia ferry—probably not much more than my own recollection of a seemingly aeons-ago ride in a hansome cab!

Progress decreed that both forms of conveyance must go. Nevertheless, the "p-r-e may's ocean liner" did have its charms. I shall miss it tremendously. But probably no more than will the 500 people—sailors, engineers, stewards and shore personnel who will see the ferry operation through to the end.



Patient Travelers Rest Awhile On The Car Deck Of The Ferry Northampton

Vehicular Steam Ferry Princess Anne Makes A Routine Crossing South-Bound

Some Have To Wait For The Next Boat—Ferry Landing Bridge At Kiptopeke



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